

## **A Birthday & a Kitten by Hopping Mad - Chrissy**

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**Summary:** Eleven gets her first pet, and her first birthday. Originally this was going to be based around her relationship with Hopper, but somehow I turned it into a Jopper fic. (Hahahaha) Sorry guys.

# 1. Chapter 1

I don't even know what happened. I must be utterly obsessed. This started out as a story about Eleven getting a kitten, and very quickly turned into yet ANOTHER Jopper story. Please review, I've written the whole story but I don't have a beta so I want to go over the other chapters a few times before posting them. I'm not going to beat around the bush, I at least want a couple of reviews before I continue! I know it's blackmail, sorry. In my defence, I'm posting TWO chapters today. :-)

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*Thursday Evening*

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"Guess what!" He arrived home from work to the excited voice of his adopted daughter. She was in the kitchen and had the phone clutched tightly against her ear, her eyes bright with happiness. Whoever was on the other line said something and El nodded enthusiastically before realising that they couldn't see her. "He said YES!"

"Who are you talking to?" He asked gruffly and slipped past her to put the jug on. El covered the mouthpiece for a moment before telling him it was Joyce. He wasn't surprised, if it weren't one of the boys she was on the phone to – it was Joyce Byers. He didn't have a problem with it, of course. He was more than happy that she had a woman to look up to, one she could trust. He couldn't think of any other woman he would rather she had attached herself to, he just hoped Joyce didn't mind the constant phone-calls.

"She wants to talk to you," El told him, handing him the phone, literally bouncing in excitement.

"Hey Joyce,"

"Hey Hop,"

"How are you doing?" He began spooning instant coffee into a mug

and before he could stretch the phone cord to the fridge El had handed him the bottle of milk. She had been sucking up to him for days. He had explained she would be having a *quiet* birthday party at the Byers house, thanks to Joyce, Will and Jonathan agreeing to host it for her. When he had asked her what she wanted for her birthday, he hadn't expected her to answer with 'A CAT'. She had been insistent ever since, telling him over and over how she had read books and she knew how to care for one... and that she would love it forever and ever.

"Oh, alright. I hear our El is getting a cat." He paused at her words '*our El*,' he wasn't going to lie to himself and say he hadn't pictured Joyce as a mother to her. She was already pretty much a surrogate mother to the teenage girl now dancing around the lounge. He rolled his eyes at his stupidity, they hadn't so much as kissed since they were eighteen years old, and here he was imagining her as a mother to his daughter.

"Yes," he sighed, resigned to the fact. He hadn't ever been big on cats, but it made sense to get El a cat, much easier to care for than a dog – and much easier to hide.

"Do you want help to pick one out? I hear you are going to the shelter."

"Actually, that would be great." This time his sigh was one of relief. He had agonised over whether to get a kitten, an adult cat, a small cat, a fluffy cat... he just didn't know and all El told him was that she would love *any* cat that he picked for her.

"I'm free this Saturday, maybe you could drop El here, Jonathan can babysit." He heard Will in the background singing out that he was *not* in fact – a baby anymore. Joyce chuckled and he could picture her ruffling her sons hair.

"It's a date." *Not a date, NOT A DATE HOPPER.* Obviously, his words had given her pause too, and he needed to rectify this fast. "Er, you know what I mean." He finished awkwardly.

"Sure," she laughed lightly into the phone and he couldn't help the smile that spread across his face. There was something about hearing

her laugh that just made him feel so... full, so... happy.

"See you in the morning then, take care Joyce."

"You too Hop." She told him quietly, seriously. Things may be better now, but he knew they were a long way from healing. It had been a rough couple of years to say the least.

**TBC.**

## 2. Chapter 2

Chapter Two:

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He woke to the sound of crashing in the kitchen, and with a groan he rolled over to check the glowing digits of his alarm clock beside his bed. 04.45am. Oh god, it was FAR too early to be up on a Saturday, his head throbbed. He rolled back over and covered his head with a pillow and tried to block out the racket of El doing whatever it was she was doing in the kitchen. He managed to stay in bed until 05.10am, but once El had started singing there was no way he was going to be able to sleep again.

"Alright, alright. I'm up." He grumbled and shoved on the nearest clothes and swung his bedroom door open with a bang. "Eleven, what in the..." the smell of something frying surprised him. He didn't even know the girl could cook.

"I'm making pancakes!" She told him excitedly. She waved a spatula which sent oil, and bits of pancake batter flying. "Sorry," she looked at the splatter on the cupboards and shrugged.

"How do you know how to make pancakes?" He asked, heading immediately for the jug. He needed coffee before he could even begin to figure this out.

"Joyce taught me."

"Of course, she did." He chuckled, picturing the two of them in the Byers kitchen made him all kinds of happy. Neither cooking nor baking were his forte, that was for sure.

"I follow this recipe here," El pointed to a slightly oily and crinkled piece of paper. "And when they are done I have to clean up everything, even the dishes. It's the rules when you make pancakes."

Sometimes hearing her form full sentences really shocked him. He had once thought it had happened all of a sudden, but really it had

been a gradual thing over the past year and a bit.

"Well they smell delicious. If I think they are good enough, I might even help with the clean-up."

"Pancakes are very nice." She licked her lips. "I tried some already!"

"Cheat," he told her and settled at the small kitchen table with his coffee. It was then that the phone rang and El dropped everything she was doing and dashed for the phone on the wall.

"Hello," she answered breathlessly. He raised an eyebrow, and the girl blushed. *It's Mike*. She whispered to him. "Yes, I'm going to Will's this morning." She twirled the phone cord around her finger, suddenly looking more like a normal teenage girl than he had ever seen before. He wasn't sure if he was proud, or worried. "Uh huh, yup." She turned her back on Hopper and whispered into the phone. "*You too.*" And then she hung the phone up, turning back to her pancakes.

"So...?" He prompted.

"Mike's going to come over to the Byers."

"Is he now?" He watched El bite back a sharp reply and force a smile on her face. She knew how Hopper was very protective and wasn't sure on her relationship. Mike said all dads were like that, and she was lucky that he hadn't threatened Mike with his gun yet. "Did you ask Joyce?"

"Will asked his mom, and she said if Hopper said yes and as long as Jonathan was babysitting it was fine."

"Uh huh," she plonked a plate of pancakes down in front of him and grabbed her own.

"Please?" She asked, batting her eyelashes at him.

"Hmm," he said through a mouthful of pancake. "These are really great!"

"Hoooppppppeeeerrrrr...?" She alternated between calling him Hopper and Dad, he didn't mind which really. They were family, and they

both knew it.

"Fine, yes Mike can visit. You know I prefer it if an adult is around though, right?"

"Yes, okay." She nods enthusiastically and digs into her own pancakes. "I can't believe I'm getting a cat!" The words are garbled, her mouth full of pancake. He raised his eyebrows but chose not to tell her off for her bad manners today. After all, tomorrow would be her very first birthday party – and today she was getting her very first pet. He didn't want to ruin her weekend.

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Joyce jumped into the passenger seat of her car and as he sat down he tried to ignore the wonderful smell of her perfume, it had become a very familiar smell of late. It was a very mild scent, and just so Joyce.

"Ready?" He lit up a cigarette and wound down his window. "Want one?" He asked holding out his packet. She scrunched up her nose and pulled out her own packet. She had never been a fan of camels, filter-less cigarettes were a bit of an acquired taste he supposed.

"She is so excited." Joyce smiled serenely as she looked out the window. "It's just so great to see, I know you weren't sure – but I think you are making a great decision. She won't be quite as lonely at the cabin now."

Guilt stabbed him at her words. It was something that constantly worried him. Though since the gate had closed he had managed to make life a little more bearable for the girl, sneaking her over to the Byers and having Nancy and Jonathan pop over to tutor her, and even letting her friends visit on the weekends... she still spent many hours a day alone.

"Hmm," he answered, frowning.

"I know you worry, Hop." She turned to him, concern in her eyes. "But you are doing the best you can, the best anyone could in your shoes."

They fell into silence, each lost in their own thoughts. It took over an hour to drive to a shelter far enough away that they would hopefully not bump into anyone they knew. By the time they arrived, Joyce had fallen asleep and he had to gently squeeze her shoulder to wake her. Without thinking he brushed a tendril of hair from her eyes as she woke, her sleepy eyes turning to him with a small smile.

"Hopper," she said softly. He pulled his hand away as if burnt, and he noticed the smile drop from her face. God, he was so smooth.

"Well, we are here." He said awkwardly pointing at the shelter before them.



### 3. Chapter 3

#### Chapter Three:

The two entered the reception area and were greeted by an elderly lady who asked them who the appointment was booked for, and to take a seat. Joyce got them both a glass of water while they waited and read through a few of the pamphlets. It wasn't long before a young man covered in cat hair came out of a door to the left of reception, looking a little strung out. He hoped he didn't look like that in a week or so, he had never lived with a cat before.

"Mr. and Mrs Hopper I assume." The man put his hand out, and Joyce opened her mouth to correct the man, but Hopper gave her a sly smile and spoke for them both.

"That's us." He enjoyed the blush that rose to her cheeks, and the smirk she gave him.

"Are you wanting a kitten or a cat?"

"Kitten," Joyce answered, while Hopper answered with "Cat." He looked at her warningly, *not* a kitten!

"Aah, undecided." The man chuckled. "Do you have children?"

"Yes, we do, that's why I said kitten." Joyce told him strongly, ignoring Hopper shaking his head beside her.

"I have to agree, it's great for kids to be able to grow up with their cat."

"A kitten it is then!" Joyce clapped her hands happily, but Hopper tugged her aside before they entered the cattery behind the door.

"Joyce!" He growled. "Kittens are much more work."

"El will be fine, she's got a good head on her shoulders."

The man held the door open for them, so Hopper had to make a decision fast. He placed a hand on Joyce's lower back, specifically

trying to make her feel uncomfortable as they followed him through the door. She squirmed a little at his touch but didn't pull away.

"Do you have a particular colour in mind?" The man asked. Hopper sighed, this time turning to Joyce and letting her decide.

"A fluffy ginger kitten." She answered quickly.

"Given it a lot of thought, huh?" He asked her with a chuckle.

"I sure have!"

They were taken into a room that had kittens on almost every surface. The two of them wandered around, and Hopper took great enjoyment out of watching Joyce coo over the kittens. He supposed that maternal instinct in her meant she was great with children *and* baby animals. He was so lost in his thoughts from watching her that when she all but threw a kitten into his arms he was so surprised he nearly dropped it.

"Sorry little guy," he told the kitten. He tried to hold it appropriately but couldn't quite figure it out.

"Here," Joyce rearranged his arms and the kitten snuggled happily into the crook of his arm. "What do you think?" She looked up at him, her eyes reminding her of El's for a moment – the excitement contagious.

"He seems... nice."

"He's very confident, he was the first one to come over."

Hopper looked down at the little bundle in his arms. The kitten was mostly ginger with white paws, and a little white muzzle. He could picture his daughter with him, and that was what counted most.

"Alright, let's take him."

The attendant came over with the paperwork and a carry box and before he knew it they were back in the car and heading to the nearest pet store.

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The attendant had given them directions which Joyce was reading off a piece of paper, but she didn't look very confident in the directions she was giving him.

"Are you *sure* it's a left here?" Hopper indicated left, but it looked as though they would be heading home if they went this way.

"Uh," she fiddled with the piece of paper. "Oops, maybe it was a left back further." He grumbled under his breath and on seeing no cars did a sneaky u-turn and began heading back the way they came. "Ooooooh, Hopper." She laughed. "What if the police catch you?"

"Reminds me of that time when..." he trailed off.

"When you took me down to Lovers Lake." She huffed. "I remember, you scared the living shit out of me." The mewing in the back distracted him briefly from answering.

"I thought Chief Pearson was going to lock me up,"

"Good thing he liked your dad so much."

"I don't know why."

"Me either," she admitted with a sigh. They finally found the pet store and after shopping for all the things the new member of his family would need, he managed to convince Joyce to have lunch with him at the diner next door.

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A quick lunch turned into lunch, many coffees and much laughter. He couldn't get enough of her, his heart swelled with pride at being able to make her happy like this. It was a rare occasion to see her so relaxed these days, and he knew he was partly to blame for it. He had left her in Hawkin's with Lonnie, and a large part of what she went through with that man was his fault. He should have tried harder to persuade her to leave the man before she became pregnant to him. He should have been a better best friend.

"What are you beating yourself up about now?" He looked up in surprise. How did she know?

"Oh, nothing." He shrugged. "I guess we should get back before El has a hernia."

"Good point." She answered, and he was glad she wasn't going to press him. He didn't feel like having a deep conversation like that today, he just wanted to make the most of the good mood – both hers and El's.

## 4. Chapter 4

### Chapter Four:

They arrived back at the Byers to a surprisingly quiet house, and it wasn't until Hopper had placed the carrier on the floor in the entranceway, turned to Joyce with a worried expression that he heard a very feminine, and excited squeal from outside.

"THEY ARE BACK" he heard El shout, and the backdoor opened with a crash and three teenagers came thundering into the entranceway.

"Quietly guys," Joyce chuckled. El tip toed over to the box, and gently opened the top to peer inside. The kitten looked up with his startling green eyes with a tiny mew, and suddenly Eleven was no longer crouched by the box. The box had closed, seemingly of its own accord, and the girl had run faster than he had ever seen back out the door.

"What the...?" He ran out after his daughter, calling her name. Joyce somehow managed to keep the boys inside and he finally found El huddled in Castle Byers, tears streaming down her face.

"Papa made me." She sobbed. "He said, no food, no books, no lights." She shuddered. "Papa said wouldn't hurt the cat, no pain. But he lied." Hopper gathered the girl into his arms, rocking her and feeling his own eyes well with tears. He could guess what *papa*, Dr. Brenner had made her do. The sick and twisted man that he was. They stayed in Castle Byers until she managed to stop crying, then Hopper crawled out and held a hand out to her.

"We can take the kitten back," he offered.

"No, no!" El all but shouted. "No, I want him."

"But if he makes you sad..."

"It was just because of colour."

"Oh, because he's ginger?"

"Yes."

"We could get another colour."

"No, I love him." Hopper chuckled. Of course she did. She was like Joyce, she only laid eyes on him once and had fallen in love. "I will not hurt him."

"I know you won't, you are a very kind and gentle girl, El." He squeezed her shoulder reassuringly. "How about we go see your new kitten, then go home for a quiet dinner. It's your big day tomorrow after all."

"Yes, thank you." She nodded. "Can I say goodbye to Mike?"

"Yeah, I'll give you some space."

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He found Joyce in the kitchen, her face pinched in worry, a cigarette almost burnt out dangling from her fingers.

"She's okay." He told her quietly, he could hear the murmuring of Mike, Will and Eleven in the lounge, so he kept his voice low, leaning towards her. "*Papa*," he sneered. "He made her kill a cat, a ginger one." Joyce's hand flew to her mouth, and he was surprised to see her eyes begin to well with tears.

"I chose wrong." She told him, sniffing.

"Oh Joyce, we didn't know. You can't blame yourself for this!" She went from sad to angry before he could even blink and he found himself leaning away from her expression.

"Oh that's rich coming from *you*."

"What do you mean?" He shoved back his chair, standing over her, suddenly angry too. Who was she to get angry like this at him? He knew he shouldn't react, knew it wouldn't help her mindset – but he was tired, and wound up after seeing Eleven so distraught.

"You constantly blame yourself." She stands too, but he is still

towering above her. "For *everything*." She steps around the table towards him, her hands fisted. "You blame yourself even for *my* mistakes." He knew what she was hinting at, Lonnie. He returned to his earlier thoughts, and suddenly wondered if Joyce could read minds.

"I-" he wanted to defend himself, but couldn't find the words. It *was* his fault.

"Jim Hopper." She walked forward and poked him in the chest. "You were eighteen flipping years old, you couldn't have done any more than you already did. You *warned* me, so many times. It's on *my* head, not yours!" She poked him again, angry tears beginning to run down her cheeks. He was vaguely aware of the teenagers going quiet in the room beside him.

"I'm sorry," he hung his head, and she used both hands to shove him this time.

"Stop it, stop it!" She cried. "It's not your fault, stop being sorry." He grabbed her wrists before she could hit him again, and suddenly she was falling into him, and for the second time in less than half an hour, he had someone he cared about crying in his arms.

"Joyce," he said gruffly. "I don't know what to say."

"Dad?" Eleven came into the kitchen, eyes wide with concern.

"Can you kids find Jonathan, order some pizza, okay? On me." He held the sobbing Joyce in his arms, and realised that talking of Lonnie, of Hopper leaving her here in Hawkin's – it was a long time overdue. Maybe if they both got it out of their system, they could finally move forward.

"Thank you," she mumbled into his shirt, he could feel the wet warmth from her tears soaking through to his skin.

"I'm going to take you to the bedroom, and then when the kids are settled I'm going to finish this conversation with you. Okay?" She nodded against his chest, and he shielded her from the kids view as he led her to the bedroom. He knew she was ashamed, she hated

crying in front of the kids, she had told him that before.

She lay down on her bed, face buried in her pillows. He took one last look at her before closing the door and finding the teenagers. They were all sitting on the floor huddled around the kitten's box.

"Okay, El, his litter tray, food and bowls are in the car. Bring them in, it looks like he gets to explore the Byers first!" He grinned and ruffled her hair. She pushed his hand away and rolled her eyes.

"Is Joyce okay?" She asked worriedly, Will was peering around Hopper trying to find his mom. Jonathan entered the room just as he began explaining.

"She's just fine, just a little tired."

"You were shouting at her." Will accused. Jonathan took a seat on the couch, brows furrowed in concern.

"It's hard to explain, kid."

"Will," Jonathan said from the couch. "Remember how we found those photos of mum when she was my age?"

"Yeah she was friends with the Chief," Will's eyes went round. "I *totally* forgot to tell you guys." He turned to El and Mike. Hopper felt uncomfortable with the direction of the conversation, but he had promised to be open with the kids from now on, so here he was...

"Well, they were just having an argument about something from way back then. It's okay."

"Yeah, your brother is right." Hopper nodded. "Now you get your kitten sorted, find him a name too... and we will be out soon for pizza."

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He entered her room quietly and sat at her feet, his hand resting on her ankles. She seemed calmer, and she was no longer crying.

"I'm so stupid," she smiled in an embarrassed way. "I can't believe I



cried like that."

"I think it's been a long time coming," he shrugged.

"It's not your fault, it was never even a little your fault." She sat up, her hand reaching for him, clearly needing the contact. He took her tiny hand in his, and squeezed gently, and then laced his fingers through hers.

"I'm glad you think that, but I should have stayed. I knew he had the potential to..." he trailed off. "I came back when I found out what he was doing." He felt a vein pulse in his temple, he hated him. Hated Lonnie with every fibre of his being.

"You had to leave Hawkin's." She sighed. "I still think, despite all that has happened... everything happens for a reason." He smiled at this, it was a good way to think of it – he supposed. "And for the record, I'm glad to have you back in my life."

"Me too." He let go of her hand and gestured to the door. "Now, let's go eat pizza and play with El's kitten. We have a big day tomorrow preparing for El's party."

"Yes, let's." She stood up, but before he could open the door she was tugging on his sleeve. "Thank you." She said softly, and then pushed herself up on her tip toes, kissing his jaw softly. He pulled her in for a hug then, resting his lips against her hair, and breathing in.

"Thank *you*." He responded. "For letting me back in."

"Always," she mumbled into his shirt. He held her for far longer than he should have, but she didn't try to free herself. He only let go when he heard Jonathan calling out that the pizza had arrived. They both took simultaneous deep breaths before re-entering the lounge with the kids.

"El has named her kitten," Will came up and gently took his mums hand, he was such a sweet kid. Not embarrassed at all by his mother the way most teenage boys would be.

"What have you named him?" Joyce knelt on the floor, picking up one of the toys El had brought in, wiggling it to attract the kitten's

attention.

"Luke Skywalker,"

Hopper groaned from the kitchen where he was opening pizza boxes. She was *obsessed* with Star Wars; the whole gang were. He shouldn't have been surprised!

"That's a lovely name," Joyce looked knowingly over her shoulder at Hopper.

They all dug into their pizza, having to try and eat without Luke Skywalker's paws batting the slices from their hands. Hopper couldn't help but fall a little in love with the kitten's boldness. He wasn't afraid of anything, he would be a good fit for El.

Once they had finished eating and cleaned up he managed to convince El to load Luke Skywalker into the car, Mike carried all of the kitten's new belongings out to Hopper's truck. They sat heads bent close together (a little too close in Hopper's opinion) in the cab of the truck. Hopper waved goodbye to the boys and gave Joyce a one-armed hug before turning to leave. He saw something in her eyes, a little spark... and he wondered if despite their argument, maybe letting all of that anger out had only strengthened their friendship.

**TBC.**

## 5. Chapter 5

Chapter Five:

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El's Birthday!

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El woke to a purring ball of fur tucked up near her face, and she felt her face split into a grin. It felt so unreal. She never in a million years would have guessed that her dad, Hopper, would say yes to her getting a pet. She had a list of things that she had wanted for her birthday, her back-up plan was to convince him to let her build a garden outside the cabin, so she would have something to care for during the day when she was alone... but Luke Skywalker was way better than flowers!

She was still in bed, nuzzling Luke with her face and trying to mimic his purr when Hopper knocked on her door.

"Wake up sleepyhead!" He called through the door. She kissed Luke on the face and threw the covers off, almost knocking the poor thing to the floor. She apologised profusely and caught him up in her arms before exiting her bedroom.

"Good morning," she told Hopper. She felt a little nervous, she wasn't sure what to expect on her birthday. Did they have breakfast as normal?

"Happy Birthday!" She and Luke were both embraced tightly, and the kitten let out a little meow of complaint and she let him down onto the floor the moment her dad let go.

"I-" she shook her head. "What do I say?" She asked, thoroughly confused.

"Normally you just say: 'thank you'" he chuckled and ruffled her already messy hair. "Now c'mon over here, kid." She smiled, he was so patient with her. She hated not knowing how a normal kid would

respond to simple things like someone saying, 'happy birthday'.

She felt her eyes widen, almost bugging out of her head at the sight before her. Not only was there an eggo-extravaganza on the table, but a box wrapped in pink with a purple ribbon on top.

"Is this for me?" She felt like she was floating as she made her way to their little kitchen table.

"It sure is."

"But you gave me Luke," she pointed out the kitten who was now climbing up the side of the couch.

"I'm your dad, I can get you more than one present." He dropped into his usual seat and nudged the present closer to her side of the table.

"What is it?" Then she laughed at her stupid question and began carefully untying the ribbon. Of course, he wasn't going to tell her, she had to open it! She tried very hard to open the paper without ripping it, and she could see Hopper pretending not to notice her trepidation. Finally, a white box appeared and on opening it she found some kind of clothing, and the most beautiful white mary-jane shoes she had *ever* seen! Nancy had mary-janes, Mike had showed her once. She gently took out the shoes and placed them on her chair, next she found a white pair of stockings, and then best of all... she pulled out the prettiest dress she had ever seen! It was pink with a large white ribbon around the middle. She didn't think she had ever worn something as beautiful as this dress.

"Pretty!" She felt her eyes welling with tears. For the first time in her life she wasn't crying because she was sad.

"Is it okay?" He stood up, looking worried. "Do you like it?" She stood too and held the dress against herself. She looked up at Hopper with the biggest smile she could muster, and she watched his shoulders drop in relief.

"I love them!" She picked all her new items up and placed them gently back into the box, placing it tidily on the floor next to her. "Can I wear my dress today? And my shoes?"

"Of course! That's what I bought them for." She tried to enjoy her eggo-extravaganza, but found her eyes kept wandering between Luke and her brand-new dress and shoes. She had never had so many wonderful things in all her life! This was the best day she had ever had, and her party hadn't even begun!

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Joyce ushered the boys out the door with strict instructions to get the yard looking tidy. She had already been up since five in the morning ensuring the house was spotless, of course having to re-clean straight after breakfast because no matter how hard they tried Jonathan and Will always ended up leaving mess on the dining table. She had been planning El's birthday for weeks now and she wanted it to be *perfect*. It was difficult without having a lot of money, but Hopper had dropped off all the decorations and he would be swinging by later with the party food and cake.

She nearly leapt out of her skin when the phone rang and had to take a moment to catch her breath before answering.

"Hello,"

"Hey," it was Hopper.

"Nancy just arrived, is it okay to come over?" She heard girlish giggles in the background, and she felt her nerves settle a little.

"Sure, come on over."

She was glad that Hopper had decided to sneak Nancy over to the cabin instead of leaving El alone on her birthday. She knew the girl would be busy with her kitten, but it just seemed so unfair to have to leave her alone on her very first birthday!

"Mooooooooooooom," she rolled her eyes at the sound of Will calling her from the doorway. "Mike's here, we need to go get the last bit of El's present."

"Where's Jonathan?" She found Will and Mike standing in the doorway, Will with his muddy sneakers on. She was pleased he had remembered to stay outside for once.

"I'm here mom," her eldest son came up the stairs behind Will. "What is it?"

"Can you please drive the boys?"

"Yeah, sure." She was so darn lucky to have a son like Jonathan. He never seemed to mind caring for Will, not after they had lost him anyway.

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He carried a washing basket filled with food to the doorstep, and before he even had a chance to knock Joyce had opened the door.

"Is there more?" She asked.

"Hello to you too," he joked. "Yes, in the front."

He took the basket to the kitchen and began laying everything out, Joyce had done an amazing job cleaning the house. He could see balloons hanging from every doorway, and the large "Happy 13th Birthday" banner in pride of place on the large lounge wall. The front door banged against the wall and he rushed out to the entranceway to help Joyce carry the second basket in, she had piled the cake on top and was completely hidden behind the box.

"Here, let me." He took the basket from her arms. "You couldn't even see where you were going." He laughed.

"So how was her morning?" Joyce asked as she switched the jug on. "Coffee?"

"Yes please." He began emptying the second basket onto the bench as he spoke. "She was up late, she seemed a little shy at first." He shrugged. "I guess she didn't know what a birthday would be like."

"Has Luke Skywalker settled in?"

"He's been great. He isn't nearly as destructive as I thought... yet."

"Here," she handed him a steaming mug of coffee and he ignored the shiver that ran up his spine when their fingers brushed. *Not today,*

worry about those feelings later. He reminded himself. "Do you think the place looks okay?" She was chewing on her lower lip worriedly.

"It looks *amazing*." He assured her. "El is going to love it. Where are the boys anyway?"

"They are off getting the last of her present, I don't know what it is – they won't tell me."

"As long as it's not another pet." He frowned. "Or a baby demo-dog, do we really trust Dustin?" He raised an eyebrow. She burst into laughter, and before long he was laughing with her. Really, it wasn't funny enough to warrant so much laughter, but he supposed that she felt like he did – it was nice for everyone to be in such an upbeat mood for once.

"Well, only an hour to go. I had better go get the birthday girl ready!" He drained his coffee and washed it in the sink before turning to leave.

"Are you sure it's okay?" She asked quietly, gesturing around at the decorations. He turned her towards him, and placed his hands on her shoulders.

"The house looks amazing, Joyce. Don't be silly." He let go and tipped his hat towards her. "I never could have done this without you. Thank you." Joyce gave him a shy smile and then turned away from him.

"I'll start on the food then, see you soon."

"Will do," he told her, and took one last look at the hunched shoulders of his friend. Despite their earlier laughter, he knew that she was still her nervous self. He wondered if that anxiety that she fought against every day would ever go away completely...

**TBC.**

## 6. Chapter 6

### Chapter Six

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### El's Birthday Party

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Hopper opened the passenger door to his truck and helped El down. He noticed her trembling in anticipation and he gave her hand a gentle squeeze. They both turned to the Byer's house, and before they even took a step forward Will, Dustin, Lucas Max and Mike came running down the porch steps, Mike stopped first – his jaw dropping. El turned to look up at Hopper worriedly, her brow furrowed.

"Wow!" Will grinned. "That dress is so pretty!"

"Yeah if you like pink." Lucas retorted.

"I think it's perfect." Max said, flicking her long hair over her shoulder.

"It's pretty." Dustin agreed.

"You look so pretty." Mike finished softly, and he watched the other boys roll their eyes in unison. El blushed but seemed to lose some of her worry and rushed forward to embrace first Mike, and then everyone else.

"Thank you." She told them, her face lighting up. "My dad got me it." She then pointed to her shoes. "And look!"

"Wow," Hopper looked up to see Joyce on the porch, her eyes twinkling. "Did you pick that outfit yourself Hop?" The kids rushed past Joyce and into the house, and he heard excited squeals from his daughter.

"Yeah, is it okay? Do you think?" It was his turn to be nervous.



"You chose good." She lit up a smoke and gestured to the seats on her porch. "Let's give them a minute, eh?"

"Good plan." He sat himself on the couch next to her and shook out a cigarette of his own, but after rummaging through all his pockets he couldn't find a lighter.

"Here," she leant forward, a cheeky look on her face. He was flung back to old memories, as kids they only had matches and if they only had one match left, which often seemed to be the case – they would light just one smoke and then use that one to light everyone else's.

He leant forward, and touched his cigarette to hers, his eyes staying on hers just a little longer than they should have. The two of them sat in silence, the smoke hovering in the air above them in the still winter air.

"I've got my eyes closed," he turned to see Will with a hand covering his eyes. "But can we open the presents now?" Joyce let out a nervous laugh.

"Why have you got your eyes closed?"

"Mike said you guys might be sucking face."

"Will!" She admonished, and Hopper laughed nervously, he *definitely* hadn't been thinking about that, not at all.

"Yes, we are coming inside now." He told the boy. "Tell Mike to watch his language."

"Yes, sir!" Will scampered back inside. He and Joyce shared an awkward smile before putting out their cigarettes and heading into the lounge. The pile of presents had grown exponentially since he had last seen it that morning. El was sitting cross-legged on the floor in front of her pile, and Jonathan was snapping a photo. He would have to ask the boy for copies, he hadn't gotten around to buying a camera since he had lost Sara.

"Can I open them now?" El asked, looking up at him, the excitement clearly writ across her face.

"Yeah, go on." He sat down on the couch and Joyce sat on the chair across from him. He figured she was just trying to prove a point to the kids by not sitting next to him, it didn't bother him. He could understand her not wanting the boys to get the wrong idea, he knew Will still missed Bob a lot – and it's not as though anything was actually going on between them.

El started off slow, and before long Mike had her tearing the paper from her gifts, paper flying in every direction. He was sure no-one was disappointed by her reaction to their choices, she probably could have received a pair of socks and been over the moon.

Joyce had bought her a necklace with a butterfly charm, El insisted that Joyce put it on her straight away and wiggled excitedly while Joyce closed the clasp. She rushed into the bathroom to look in the mirror, with her now trademark "*pretty*" being called through the open door. Will had made her a book out of A4 pages, it was drawn like a comic and the main character was a super-hero called Twelve who had telekinetic powers and saved the world. She hugged him so tight he thought the poor boy might be choking. Dustin and Lucas had gone halves in a radio so that she could talk to them all, Max gave her a bottle of green nail polish and lip gloss...

"There is one more, this one is from Nancy, Jonathan, Will and I, it's outside though."

"Really?" She took his outstretched hand and Mike gently led her outside, the rest of them trailing behind.

Hopper felt emotional at the sight before him. He now knew El had literally gotten *everything* that she had wanted for her birthday. There was a large tub, a large sack of potting mix, a trowel, watering can and a potted rose sitting in the middle of the lawn between the house and the shed. He turned from her latest gift to see her reaction and was unsurprised to see tears streaming down the girl's face.

"Best. Day. Ever." She spun on her heel and threw herself into Mike's arms. "Thank you!" Thank you!" Joyce sidled up next to him and bumped his shoulder. He looked down to see her eyes filled with tears too.

"I think it's one of the best days of my life, too." She told him. "You are a lucky man, Hop. She's a great kid."

"I know." He told her sincerely. He and El definitely had their ups and downs in the past year, but he now couldn't imagine life without the teenage girl before him.

**TBC.**

## 7. Chapter 7

OK – so I'm finished the main part of the story, but this is just a little extra for the Jopper fans reading this.

Keep in mind El is pretty innocent, so chances are she doesn't really know exactly what is going on here. ;-)

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### Chapter Seven

*Six weeks after El's birthday.*

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El was staying at the Byer's so that Hopper could go out. He said he had some "horrible work thing" to go to, and he had invited Joyce to go with him to keep him sane. She didn't quite know what he meant, but she was pleased to be able to hang out with Jonathan and Will. Nancy had arrived less than five minutes after the adults had left, and she and Will virtually had the house to themselves since Nancy and Jonathan were holed up in his room.

"Hey Will, can you teach me how to draw?" She asked her friend. She had been thinking about learning for a long time, but she was too scared to ask. She wanted to be able to draw just as well as Will.

"Yeah!" He answered enthusiastically. "I'll grab my stuff, you wait in the kitchen."

It only felt like minutes, but hours later Jonathan finally appeared out of his bedroom and told them they had to go to bed. She and Will grumbled a bit but cleaned up their mess and she settled onto the cot in Will's room.

"Hey Will," she rolled over in her bed and tried to see his face in the dark, but she only saw the whiteness of his face.

"Yeah?"

"What is a "work thing"?" She asked him.

"Oh, it's where adults go and have beer and smokes and stuff. I think sometimes they have dinner and dance too."

"Like the Snow Ball, but we don't have beer there."

"Yeah, a little."

"So... are my dad and your mom going on a date?"

"I think they are just friends." Will yawned. "Sorry, I'm so tired." He muttered. She fell quiet and eventually she realised Will had fallen asleep. She lay awake wondering what would happen if her dad *did* go on a date with Joyce. What if he and Joyce stayed together, would that mean Joyce would be her mom? Not her *real* mom, not like mama. But still... a mom would be kind of nice.

She must have fallen asleep at some point... but the sound of Hopper's truck rumbling up the driveway woke her, and on checking the digits of Will's glowing alarm clock – she discovered it was 2.13am. She couldn't believe how late they were coming home. She slid out of bed and tip toed down the hallway and poked her head around the corner into the lounge just as the front door opened.

Hopper was swaying a little, Joyce wrapped tightly in his arms and he was having some trouble shutting the door behind him. El was about to offer her assistance but Hopper managed to shut it, and then the next minute he was pushing Joyce into the door, kissing her fiercely. She covered her mouth to try and muffle the sound of surprise, but the adults were so busy they didn't even hear the little squeak that escaped. She quickly raced back to Will's room, shaking him awake immediately.

"Will, Will! Wake up!"

"Urgh," Will tried to push her arms away, she just shook harder. "What, what is it?"

"Hopper is kissing your mom."

"Wait, what...? Will sat upright. "For real?"

"Yes!"

"Eww!" Will covered his face. "I mean... it's... good I guess." He told her, his voice muffled between his hands. "Mom is lonely. Jonathan told me that." The two of them heard a thump outside their door and El couldn't contain herself anymore, she ignored Will trying to grab her and stop her and she opened Will's bedroom door.

"Dad!" Hopper and Joyce were just outside of her bedroom door, and she was pretty sure Hopper's shirt was mostly unbuttoned, but it was hard to tell in the dark. "Does this mean Joyce will be my mom?"

"Ah shit,"

"Language!" El told him sternly, and Joyce let out a giggle.

"Can we talk in the morning?" Hopper asked El, his face pained.

"I guess, yeah."

"I'll talk to her, Hop. You go on in." Joyce all but shoved him into her room, and then came over to El, giving her a tight hug, and a kiss on the top of her head. "El honey, it's all a bit more complicated than that. Let's not rush things okay? But I can be like your mom if you like, even if I'm not with Hopper. Does that make sense?"

"That's all I want." El told her and hugged her back. "Thank you." Joyce tucked her back into bed and have both her and Will a goodnight kiss before shutting the door behind them.

El couldn't believe her luck, even if Hopper wasn't going to be seeing Joyce, as in – you know – *seeing* her – she could still pretend her favourite adult apart from Hopper, was her mom! She had always wanted someone other than Nancy to teach her girl stuff. Maybe if she were lucky, Joyce might even let her try on some make-up. Nancy said she didn't want to get into trouble with Hopper, but Joyce wasn't afraid of him at all.

She fell asleep, contemplating all the things mothers and daughters do together, a smile on her face. Life was definitely pretty good right now.

**THE END.**